

# Producing Scientific Motherhood: State-led Neoliberal Modernization and Nannies' Subjectivity in Contemporary China

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## Abstract

This paper uses the perspective of “state-led neoliberal modernization” to explore the collusion of the state and the market in the construction of scientific motherhood and its effect on rural nannies in China. It claims that the state and the market work together to shape rural nannies' modern subjectivity in the neoliberal economy through the commercial training programme of scientific motherhood. Based on a case study in Shanghai, this paper argues that the training for scientific motherhood attempts to transform rural women into modern care workers through two mechanisms: reconstructing recognition and mobilizing emotion. Rather than passively receiving the training, nannies use their agency to adjust the knowledge and practice of scientific motherhood to suit their complicated working situation. Their strategies include deploying scientific knowledge flexibly and instrumentally, practising self-restraint in limited intimacy, and paying attention to their own familial investment.

**Keywords:** scientific motherhood; neoliberalism; modernization; gender; agency; China

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The concept of scientific motherhood first emerged and spread in Western countries and colonies and has held traction for more than century. It is widely accepted among women in these regions as a legitimate guide to being a good mother. It illustrates not only women's changing role in the reproductive system but also the transformed relationships between childcare, the market and the state in global capitalism. Examining the rise of scientific motherhood to illustrate how traditional culture was replaced by modern scientific knowledge and how local

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culture in colonies was conquered by Western intruders, scholars have criticized the reproduction of inequalities between gender and race hidden in the circulation of the concept. However, although a few scholars have paid attention to the intensive and scientific motherhood emerging in Chinese urban middle-class families,<sup>1</sup> and the roles of the state and market in this process,<sup>2</sup> the influence of this phenomenon on rural women has seldom been explored. This paper intends to address this gap by examining, first, how actors such as the state and domestic helper companies are involved in the construction of scientific motherhood training for rural women and, second, how the training regime of scientific motherhood affects rural nannies.

In addressing these questions, this paper uses the perspective of “state-led neoliberal modernization” to argue that the state and the market in post-Maoist China work together to advance the commercial training of scientific motherhood in neoliberal economic reform, transforming rural women into modern workers who provide good childcare services for urban middle-class families, thereby ensuring “population quality” and improving China’s competitiveness on the global stage. Embodied as a training programme at the organizational level, this “state-led neoliberal modernization” differs from that previously described in studies of the relationship between scientific motherhood and modernization. In previous studies, scholars use typologies – Western or colonial modernization – to explain the rise of “scientific motherhood” in different regions.<sup>3</sup> Unlike these explanations, “state-led neoliberal modernization” in this paper emphasizes that the state, domestic service companies and urban middle-class families work together to shape rural nannies’ modern subjectivity in the neoliberal economy. This collusion of state and market not only has a significant influence on modernization in post-Maoist China but also demonstrates that the construction of scientific motherhood in today’s China forms part of the party-state’s gender policy and a broader discursive push to promote a gender ideology that sustains the neoliberal division of labour.

This paper investigates the second point by analysing the two strategies used by domestic help agencies and the nannies’ responses. Companies not only use nannies’ internalization of the “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) discourse and the aspiration of self-development to motive the nannies to acquire scientific knowledge on child-rearing but they also utilize the nannies’ acceptance of their gender role and emotional responsibilities to cultivate their compliance. However, rural nannies also use their agency to adjust their practice of scientific motherhood in real working conditions to adapt to the complicated and contradictory pseudo-familial relationship. Their strategies include deploying scientific knowledge flexibly and instrumentally, practising self-restraint in limited intimacy, and paying attention

1 Tao 2015; Jing and Yang 2015; Yang 2018.

2 Zhu 2010.

3 Sen 1993; Apple 1995; 2006; Lee 1999; Wu 2011; Nguyen 2016.

to their own familial investment. This paper illustrates the struggle of women to become modern subjects in the neoliberal economy.

### Scientific Motherhood and Modernization

Scientific motherhood refers to the belief that a good mother must rely on medical advice and scientific information from experts to rear her children in a healthy way.<sup>4</sup> Modernization is the dominant perspective for explaining the emergence of scientific motherhood in different regions. The current analysis is based on the typology of Western or colonial modernization. The Western modernization model can be traced to Rima Apple's study of the scientific motherhood movement in Western countries.<sup>5</sup> In this model, mothers were influenced by physicians, child-rearing experts, health reformers and companies, and were led to believe that the traditional approach to childcare was inferior to modern medical advice from experts and that they should take a more scientific approach to rear their children. This model has also been used by scholars to analyse scientific motherhood in some Asian societies.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the colonial modernization model has been adopted by scholars to emphasize the conflict between Western modern childcare practices and local traditional approaches in colonies. Thuy Lin Nguyen's study of French Colonial Vietnam reveals that local mothers' traditional experiences of mothering were depicted as backward and inferior during the process of colonization by Western governments, who legitimated their intrusion with scientific medical discourse.<sup>7</sup> Samita Sen's study illustrates that Bengali nationalists used the construction of scientific childrearing to cultivate healthy children for nation building in opposition to the colonizers.<sup>8</sup> Despite some differences, both cases focus on the tension between colonizer and colonized during the construction of scientific motherhood. This tension was also evident in colonial Taiwan when the scientific motherhood discourse circulated there.<sup>9</sup>

Neither perspective, however, can explain the emergence of scientific motherhood in China. First, the modernization of China is complicated since there have been different modernization projects in pre-Maoist, Maoist and post-Maoist China. These multiple modernization projects, deemed as "alternative" by some scholars, are neither Western nor colonial modernization.<sup>10</sup> Second, the Western modernization perspective stresses the role of non-state actors, such as markets, while the colonial modernization perspective emphasizes the role of the state in constructing the discourse on scientific motherhood. Neither approach pays attention to the interaction of the state and market in the

4 Apple 1995.

5 Ibid.; Apple 2006.

6 Lee 1999.

7 Nguyen 2016.

8 Sen 1993.

9 Wu 2011.

10 Rofel 1999; Lin 2006.

construction of scientific motherhood, which is crucial to gain an understanding of the impetus and factors underlying the spread of the concept of scientific child-rearing in China. To fill this gap, the following sections illustrate the scientific construction of childrearing in different eras in China and develop a new perspective through which to examine the collusion of the state and market in the construction of scientific motherhood in post-Maoist society.

### The “Scientific” Construction of Childrearing in Pre-Maoist and Maoist China

“Scientific” discourses around reproduction and childrearing have appeared in China since the late Qing dynasty. Although the implications of “science” and the forces at work to promote scientific childrearing are distinct in different periods, these discourses are all closely related to the state’s national modernization and the attempt to improve China’s competitiveness on the global stage. These multiple modernization projects all require women to become “good mothers” who use scientific methods to raise “good children” and contribute to the state’s development.

In the late Qing era, Western knowledge of prenatal education, breastfeeding, child nutrition and psychology was introduced into China as an important part of modern science. Male intellectuals were expected to promote China’s global competitiveness by acquiring knowledge of science (*saixiansheng* 赛先生) and democracy (*dexiansheng* 德先生). Employing the discourse of “strengthening the nation and conserving lineages” (*qiangguo baozhong* 强国保种), they called on Chinese women to acquire Western knowledge of childrearing in order to raise healthier and smarter children who were expected to build a better and more powerful China.<sup>11</sup> Depicting women as “mothers of the nation” (*guomin zhi mu* 国民之母), these narratives emphasized women’s reproductive function and their responsibility for childrearing in the drive towards China’s modernization. Furthermore, under the influence of patriotism in the early 20th century, numerous girls schools were established to teach women how to be good wives and mothers and to raise strong children for the nation.<sup>12</sup> Following the split between the Communist Party (CCP) and Kuomintang Party (KMT) in 1927, the KMT government initiated the “New life” movement, which promoted the traditional Confucian division of labour between the sexes and encouraged women to improve the standards of their housekeeping.<sup>13</sup>

Although these narratives were abandoned following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the emphasis on the relationship between women’s reproductive function and China’s global competitiveness became a historical legacy that shaped sociocultural configurations related to motherhood. During the Maoist period, women’s two major roles – as mother and worker – were central to the progress of China’s modernization; however, their role as workers or

11 Ke 2011.

12 Croll 1978.

13 Ibid.

citizens was still subordinate to the motherhood role.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, during this time, the state was involved in the creation of socialist motherhood. In government propaganda, raising “socialist successors” (*shehuizhuyi jieban ren* 社会主义接班人) was still women’s priority, even though both rural and urban women were deeply drawn into socialist production. To help urban women combine work and domestic responsibilities, the state built various public childcare and nursery facilities in cities. These public nurseries, along with local women’s federations, promoted knowledge on scientific childrearing on behalf of the state, urging women to take good care of the country’s “socialist successors.” They also distributed information about contraception, childbirth and childrearing to women workers when the state enacted the family planning policy to control population growth in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> During this period, “scientific” discourse was used to legitimize the state’s practice of controlling women’s sexual and reproductive function to serve socialist modernization.<sup>16</sup>

### Scientific Motherhood and Post-Maoist China: State-led Neoliberal Modernization

Throughout the 1980s, scientific discourse on childrearing was linked to the early marketization of the economy, which underpinned the later emergence of China’s version of its neoliberalist modernization project. In this paper, we develop the perspective of “state-led neoliberal modernization” by not only exploring the connection between scientific motherhood and the process of modernization in the post-Maoist economic transition but also by examining the connection between scientific motherhood discourse and the neoliberal economy reform promoted by the state.

Seen from this perspective, the commercial training programme of scientific motherhood for rural nannies, as implemented by various Chinese domestic agencies, provides a possible pathway to analyse the intersection of neoliberal economy reform and modernization projects in post-Maoist China. First, the training programme of scientific motherhood for rural nannies forms an important process for the production of commercial scientific childcare products, which are marketed by private companies working for profit in the care market. The emergence of the care market combines with the withdrawal of the state from welfare for individuals. According to David Harvey, the liberation of the market and the reduction of the social welfare commitment are both manifestations of neoliberalism.<sup>17</sup> Harvey argues that distinct from neoliberalism in other countries, the construction of the market economy in China incorporates neoliberal elements integrated with the control of the state.<sup>18</sup> This combination of strong

14 Robinson 1985.

15 Evans 1995.

16 Ibid.

17 Harvey 2005, 120.

18 Ibid.

state and neoliberal policy is also termed “state neoliberalism” by Alvin So.<sup>19</sup> Second, the training programme of scientific motherhood for rural nannies is closely related to the state’s national modernization and the attempt to improve China’s competitiveness on the global stage. Domestic companies that run training programmes have two goals. The first is to improve rural nannies’ *suzhi* by transforming them into modern and professional care workers. The second goal is to provide a good scientific motherhood service for urban middle-class mothers and to help these mothers take responsibility as “good mothers” who use scientific knowledge to improve their own children’s *suzhi*. Both goals are a significant way to realize the 1980s’ objective of “modernization.” Moreover, examining the impact of scientific motherhood training on rural nannies demonstrates how individual subjects are shaped in the state-led neoliberal modernization project. According to Ann Anagnost, the body has value in the neoliberal economy and can be invested to produce “surplus value” for capitalist accumulation.<sup>20</sup> The combination of self-improvement and self-investment, which demonstrates individuals’ aspirations to treat their own bodies as “containers” of value, is seen as the characteristic of modern subjects in post-Maoist China’s neoliberal economy.<sup>21</sup> By analysing the relationship between rural nannies’ subjectivity and the training programme of scientific motherhood, this paper also demonstrates the process of gendered subject formation in state-led neoliberal modernization as well as the limitation of subjects with aspirations for self-development and self-investment and their incapability to challenge the hegemony of state neoliberalism.

## Method and Data

This research is based on data collected from interviews and fieldwork notes recorded at Double Tree, a domestic service agency in Shanghai.<sup>22</sup> The fieldwork lasted seven months, from October 2015 to April 2016. The company was established in 1997 in Shanghai by a businessman. Classed as a “model” domestic agency by the local government, it has six direct branches and 18 franchise companies. Aside from its other types of investment, this private company earns 10–15 per cent commission on domestic workers’ wages. The company employs more than one thousand workers and provides various domestic services for urban middle-class families in Shanghai, including cleaning, housekeeping, elderly care and childcare for children of different ages in the form of nannies (*baomu* 保姆). This paper focuses on childcare services provided for urban middle-class families with children up to 3 years old. Double Tree charges 6,000 yuan monthly per child for its childcare services. After commission is deducted, workers receive 5,100 to 5,400 yuan as their monthly wage. The

19 So 2012.

20 Anagnost 2008.

21 Yan 2008.

22 Double Tree is a pseudonym.

nannies are recruited from rural areas through networks of friends and relatives. They are female, married and middle-school graduates between the ages of 30 and 40. New recruits are provided with accommodation in dormitories and free food and free training. All new nannies are required to attend a ten-day training course, which is the first part of the full programme. Double Tree has set up an independent department for training and employs one full-time trainer, Xiao Zhang, and three assistants to oversee the two parts of the training programme. During the initial training course, the new recruits are given a manual and attend ten classes related to professional ethics, housework and childcare skills. Professionals such as paediatricians and experts in early education are invited to give lectures. After this training, the nannies receive an official certificate and are qualified to sign contracts with the company and clients. The new nannies work for and live with urban middle-class families, except on the weekends, when they return to the company. While they wait at the company for a new client or rest at the weekend, nannies are required to attend the second part of the training, daily training. This takes place from 9 am to 11 am in a conference room close to the dormitory and comprises frequent supplementary classes which are aimed at teaching the nannies the skills to solve the daily problems they might encounter as they serve urban families. This training takes the form of lectures, seminars and practice. The trainer collects feedback from both clients and nannies and then determines the theme of the training each day.

The authors attended the company's ten-day systematic training and daily training sessions as assistants to observe how the trainer inculcated the nannies with the ideas of scientific motherhood and how this process reproduced class and gender inequalities through scientific and love discourses. The authors observed the trainer's interpretation of scientific motherhood and her interaction with the nannies. In addition, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews: eleven with nannies employed by the company, three with company managers and three with the trainer and her other two assistants. Each interview lasted one and a half hours and covered the managers' and trainer's understanding of scientific motherhood; their goal in designing the training programme; the nannies' backgrounds; their understanding and past experience of being mothers themselves; their knowledge and practice after training; and their relationship with the clients' children and other family members. All of the 11 nannies interviewed were married and had children; three had two children while the others had only one. They originated from rural regions located across eight different Chinese provinces, including Sichuan, Henan, Shangdong, Jiangsu and Anhui.

### **The Emergence of the Childcare Market and State-led Neoliberal Modernization**

The "state-led neoliberal modernization" of post-Mao China has meant the retreat of the state from collective welfare, including childcare. This has left individual families exposed to the risk of insecurity brought about by fierce global

competition. It has also propelled the formation of a market on which urban families depend to purchase the goods and services of childcare. In addition, the state introduced the single-child policy in 1979. Linked to a national discourse on improving “population quality” (*renkou suzhi* 人口素质), the one-child policy was used by the state to encourage individual families to cultivate the *suzhi* of children with prenatal and postnatal care, or “superior births” (*yousheng youyu* 优生优育).<sup>23</sup> The development of *suzhi* was oriented at not only ensuring families’ futures but also accelerating the transformation of China from a state of less development to one of growth.<sup>24</sup>

In this neoliberal modernization project, the body of the child becomes a repository for value that can be input and enhanced, and childrearing becomes an investing behaviour that links the state’s development with the individual family’s self-improvement strategy.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the state’s “quality project” is deemed the mother’s responsibility.<sup>26</sup> According to Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin Winckler, the “good mother” has been “defined as one who would sacrifice her own interests for her child and use scientific methods to raise a ‘quality’ youngster” since the 1980s.<sup>27</sup> During this time, advice on scientific childrearing gradually appeared in women’s magazines.<sup>28</sup> The Shanghai Women’s Federation even established a centre for scientific childrearing to encourage urban mothers to use scientific methods to rear their children. It also provided medical and psychological training courses for urban mothers, emphasizing their primary tasks in childcare and family education.<sup>29</sup>

Surrounded by a variety of scientific childrearing information from different actors, urban middle-class mothers often experience contradictory and anxious feelings. The information provided by women’s federations, the media and experts is sometimes inconsistent, leaving urban middle-class mothers struggling to follow different childrearing styles.<sup>30</sup> Teresa Kuan’s study shows that these mothers are in a constant state of ambivalence and “contradictoriness” (*maodun* 矛盾).<sup>31</sup> The tensions between reality and the desire to observe the rules of good parenting present them with a dilemma.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, as Amy Hanser and Jialin Li argue, the demands of scientific childrearing, such as breastfeeding, not only clash with workplace demands but also conflict with urban middle-class women’s other identities as independent individuals, as workers or as sexually attractive

23 Anagost 2008.

24 *Ibid.*; Woronov 2008; 2009.

25 Kuan 2015.

26 Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Honig and Hershatter 1998; Tao 2015.

29 “Introduction to Centre of Scientific Children Rearing in Shanghai affiliated with Shanghai Women’s Federation.” [www.shchild.cn](http://www.shchild.cn), 23 July 2017, <http://www.shchild.cn/about.asp?ID=1>. Accessed 23 July 2017.

30 Kuan 2015; Xu 2017.

31 Kuan 2015, 86.

32 *Ibid.*, 101–08.



young women.<sup>33</sup> These contradictions cause anxiety for urban middle-class women, sometimes prompting them to seek an alternative way to manage and resolve the conflict. One strategy is to purchase the service of scientific childrearing from the care market.

Although many Chinese families can turn to grandparents for childcare, numerous urban middle-class families still choose to hire a nanny to work in partnership with existing caregivers, especially when their children are infants or toddlers.<sup>34</sup> A survey conducted by the Shanghai Women's Federation showed that 62 per cent of urban families wanted to purchase domestic services, including childcare.<sup>35</sup> Since the first domestic service company was established in Beijing in 1983, the market for privatized childcare has grown rapidly. A report by a marketing company revealed that there were 4,720 domestic service companies in Shanghai alone in 2010.<sup>36</sup> Despite the large number of such companies, urban middle-class families often express their dissatisfaction with nannies' services in the childcare market. Most urban middle-class families in our study revealed that they expected to hire a nanny who had the professional skills and scientific childrearing knowledge to help an anxious mother take care of her children under three years of age. However, they complained that it was difficult to find a nanny who met their requirements. People in urban middle-class areas often distrust nannies from rural areas and doubt that they have sufficient scientific childrearing knowledge and skills. Domestic service agencies share these views and regard rural nannies as "backward" and "low quality" (*di suzhi* 低素质). To allay such fears and gain more clients, agencies such as Double Tree put prospective nannies through a training programme to transform them from "backward" rural women into professional workers. Following their completion of such training, Double Tree expected the nannies to be capable of providing "high-quality" scientific childrearing services – the product of "scientific motherhood" produced and sold in the childcare market – for urban middle-class families. Trainer Xiao Zhang explained how the programme worked:

You see, their [rural nannies'] habits are so bad, because of their low education and "low quality" (*di suzhi*). They don't care about hygiene; that might be harmful to the babies' health. I can't imagine what would happen if they used the same ways to "deal with" our clients' babies. I don't believe that our urban clients would tolerate their rude and chaotic method of childcare. That is why we implement systematic and scientific training to help them become professional domestic helpers of "high quality" (*gao suzhi* 高素质).<sup>37</sup>

*Suzhi*, as employed in the state's discourse on population control and education, refers to both individual and collective qualities valued in contemporary China, ranging from physical condition to educational level to morality.<sup>38</sup> The improvement of rural nannies' *suzhi* through training is the mutual goal of domestic

33 Hanser and Li 2017.

34 Zhang et al. 2018, 5–10.

35 Shanghai Women's Federation 2004. Retrieved from <http://en.shwomen.org>.

36 Beijing Liben Technology, Ltd 2012.

37 Interview with programme trainer Xiao Zhang, Double Tree, Shanghai, 12 December 2015.

38 Murphy 2004; Kipnis 2006; Jacka 2009.

service companies and urban middle-class families in the neoliberal economy. Companies see nannies as human resources into which capital can be invested. Companies such as Double Tree believe that rural women can learn to provide the “high quality” (*gaozhiliang* 高质量) product of “scientific motherhood” through their training programmes and thereby attract more clients and more profit to enhance capital accumulation. For the families, purchasing a high-quality product of “scientific motherhood” is also an investment in their own children: it assists in the cultivation of their children’s *suzhi*, thereby ensuring the future of the family and the state’s well-being. Moreover, the training programmes can be seen as a part of the neoliberal modernity project to turn rural women into modern workers. By labelling rural people as being low *suzhi*, state developmental initiatives gain the legitimacy to instruct them how to be workers and citizens.<sup>39</sup> Encouraged by the local government and women’s federations, domestic service companies become agents of the state in promoting the process of rural women’s civilization. According to the “Regulations of Shanghai domestic service sector” Article 25, the domestic service companies that sponsor training programmes and the nannies who attend these programmes can receive allowances from the Shanghai Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. Through the scientific motherhood training programmes, the state, urban middle-class families and domestic service companies work together to shape rural nannies’ modern subjectivities in the neoliberal economy.

### **The Improvement of Nannies’ *Suzhi* and the Production of High-quality “Scientific Motherhood”**

To produce a high-quality product of “scientific motherhood,” Double Tree utilizes the strategy of cultivating the nannies’ *suzhi* to motivate them to learn the knowledge and skills of scientific childrearing. The first aspect of the strategy is reconstructing recognition based on the legitimacy of authority and internalization of the *suzhi* discourse. The other is mobilizing emotion based on the mother’s gender role in the family and her “emotional” responsibilities to her children.

#### *Reconstructing recognition*

There are two parts to reconstructing recognition: knowledge learning and practice. The manual used by Double Tree in its ten-day systematic training covers breastfeeding, infant weaning, bathing, exercising and early education, all of which are extracted from bestsellers such as the *Practical Encyclopaedia of Newborn Baby Care* and *Caring for Your Baby and Young Child*.<sup>40</sup> Both of these books are regarded as expert compendiums of “scientific knowledge” on mothering. Although there is no evidence, the trainers assume that these books are in wide circulation among their clients. During the training, nannies

39 Murphy 2004.

40 Chen 2011; American Academy of Pediatrics 2004.

are required to read this information repeatedly and remember every detail. In addition, paediatricians from the Maternity and Child Health Hospital (MCHH) are invited to teach infant healthcare and how to prepare nutritious meals for infants scientifically. Assistant professors researching early education give lectures on how to bathe and caress infants and how to develop infants' intelligence according to the scientific laws of child psychology. These "authorities" legitimate scientific instruction and promote the nannies' acquisition of new childrearing knowledge. Nanny Wu explained why she trusts the experts:

They are knowledgeable experts who have higher education. They teach us the essence of their research. It is more scientific than our experience. Even though I have children who are ten years old, I can't figure out the rules of childrearing. But these experts can.<sup>41</sup>

Most nannies believe that the experts' teaching can help to improve their "professional quality" (*zhiye suzhi* 职业素质). Owing to the internalization of the *suzhi* discourse, most nannies readily accept the experts' advice. As Rachel Murphy argues, the *suzhi* discourse causes social agents to accept various developmental interventions and to regulate their everyday activities accordingly.<sup>42</sup> Seeing themselves as being of low *suzhi*, rural nannies believe that knowledgeable experts with "higher" *suzhi* (*genggao de suzhi* 更高的素质) can help them to develop a degree of professionalism:

The [trainers' and experts'] training on nursing babies at different stages is very scientific. We have no idea about nursing, but they know a lot. They are knowledgeable. They are experts in this field. They told us that babies under three years old have lots of sensitive periods, but we had no idea before. Although we have been working for ten years, we still can't clearly tell when the baby's teething starts, let alone how to be a professional completely and systematically. The book is also useful. I had not read it before, but the expert told us that the editor and writer refined the important tips and made them easy to follow.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to providing knowledge, trainers teach a standard and regimented schedule of childcare for rural nannies to follow. In Pei-Chia Lan's studies of migrant domestic workers, a schedule is often used to correct domestic workers' "backward behaviour."<sup>44</sup> Similarly, trainers use schedules to ensure that the knowledge of scientific childcare is put into actual practice, helping rural nannies gain proficiency in scientific childcare skills. For example, nannies practise helping mothers to breastfeed in a training room furnished like a real household but with mannequins. If the trainer observes that the nannies are not following the guidelines, she corrects them immediately. Other elements of childcare are divided into simple segments that are analysed and standardized according to a timetable so that nannies can follow each simple step and, for example, finish housework proficiently. The training manual also includes a ten-day recipe schedule and other standard domestic work tasks, such as cleaning the kitchen, toilet and windows, and packing clothes. All of these tasks are standardized. Double

41 Interview with Nanny Wu, Double Tree, Shanghai, 20 November 2016.

42 Ibid.

43 Interview with Nanny Wang, Double Tree, Shanghai, 15 November 2015.

44 Lan 2006.

Tree also invites “model” nannies to mentor the newcomers to help them transform their habits and follow every step of the childrearing guidelines. By relating their own stories of how they improved their *suzhi*, the model nannies reinforce the relationship between the practice of scientific motherhood and self-development. In their view, the acquisition and practice of scientific knowledge is a requirement of nannies’ self-development and can help nannies to win clients’ trust and praise, earn more money to support their own children and even escape the low-*suzhi* label. By utilizing the model nannies’ stories of personal change, Double Tree aims to trigger the newcomers’ aspirations for self-development and encourage them to learn and put into practice the knowledge of scientific motherhood.

### *Mobilizing emotion*

Mobilizing emotion is another significant aspect of the strategy to produce professional childcare providers who ascribe to the idea of scientific motherhood. This process also encompasses two parts. The first is linking motherly love to the nannies’ professional ethics and stressing nannies’ “emotional” responsibilities to their clients’ children. The second is reinforcing the nannies’ gender role in the family by encouraging them to imagine their intimate relationship with their own children and other family members.

Harriet Evans argues that the “feminisation of intimacy” emerging in contemporary China emphasizes the mother’s responsibility for expressing love for her children.<sup>45</sup> Love not only turns into an individual ethic in the childcare of modern families but also becomes a professional ethic for nannies to guarantee the quality of scientific childcare services. In Xiao Suwei’s (2020) study of Beijing nannies, the domestic company places special emphasis on “love.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly in Double Tree, on the first page of the nannies’ manual, it is stressed that a nanny should “love her job and devote herself to the baby.” This is considered to be a fundamental part of nannies’ “professional ethics” and the manual stresses that love and client-centric service ideas are the company’s core principles. Women’s emotional responsibility in individual families is combined with the emotional requirement of employment in commercial childcare. On the first day of systematic training, Double Tree’s trainer, Xiao Zhang, imparts to the nannies that love can make them more successful and acceptable to urban families. Model nannies give lectures to newcomers on modesty and exhibiting tolerance towards their clients, with whom they are required to maintain an intimate relationship.

Furthermore, Double Tree utilizes the nannies’ internalization of feminine intimacy to ensure that they express an emotional connection to the clients’ children. Under the impact of market-driven and state discourses, women consciously and unconsciously accept the need to be empathetic, communicative

45 Evans 2010.

46 Xiao 2020.

and supportive of family members.<sup>47</sup> By blurring the family and employment relationships, trainers attempt to mobilize nannies' motherly love and transform it into loyalty and enthusiasm for work. By stressing that nannies should "love your job and treat the clients as your family members," the trainers encourage the nannies to behave as if the client's baby is their own and the adults their own family members. By mobilizing such emotions of love, trainers encourage "perspective-taking" and "empathy" (*huanwei sikao* 换位思考) and instruct the nannies to imagine their working environment to be similar to their own family life. During daily training, the trainer always invokes the nannies' "mother" role. By urging them to recollect their emotional responsibility in their own family, the trainer encourages the nannies to transform their labour relationship with clients into a family relationship with relatives. During the Double Tree training, the trainer asks the nannies to imagine what they would do with their own children when caring for the children of clients, thus motivating their enthusiasm for their work: "In other people's homes, you should do what you would do in your own home." This is reiterated by the training teacher: "If you hurt own children, (as a mother) you will be angry." Such mobilization of emotions arouses in the nannies a feeling of being "mother" to the client's children. In this way, the nannies integrate their emotions of biological motherhood into their work. Nanny Li was heartbroken when she observed a baby vomit, "just like her own child." The nannies shared this view:

If you do not have this mentality, you cannot do this job ... Just as the teacher said, your mind must be made sure to love this job, (and you have to) love the children ... You go to their family, take over their child, so your feelings must be like you are taking care of your own children.<sup>48</sup>

When you are taking care of others' children, you should not think they are someone else's children.<sup>49</sup>

Nanny Wan also related that she imagined the children of her clients to be her own children when she was taking care of them:

Taking care of clients' babies reminds me of my own children when they were little, and they are so cute. Sometimes, images of my daughter when she was less than a month old appear in my mind. She is tiny and cute. It makes me recall lots of things that happened 20 years ago. Basically, every time I see my clients' children, they remind me of my own child, so I will treat the baby as my own child.<sup>50</sup>

When they come into conflict with clients, nannies are encouraged to imagine a situation with their own family members (mother-in-law, husband, etc.). For example, when nannies experience discrimination, the trainer encourages them to link this to a wife's subordinate position in traditional Chinese families. In that way, the conflict is reduced from a conflict in an employment relationship to something trivial that may occur within a family, and this can close the gap between the two parties. For example, when Nanny Li complained that one of her clients only gave her leftovers

47 Evans 2010.

48 Interview with Nanny Li, Shanghai, 20 December 2015.

49 Interview with Nanny Lin, Shanghai, 4 February 2016.

50 Interview with Nanny Wan, Shanghai, 12 March 2016.

to eat, the trainer calmed her by asking her to think about being a mother and a wife in her own family and how she would treat her own family members: “We also give the best to our children first, and then to my husband, and the last is mine, so it is normal that they treat their own families better.”<sup>51</sup> After receiving this advice, Nanny Li thought for a little while and then agreed. She did not complain again. On another occasion, the nannies complained that it was difficult to communicate with the elderly. The training teacher simply asked: “Try to ask yourself, do you get along well with your own mother-in-law?” This generated a discussion about how they related to their own mothers-in-law and deflected their anger.<sup>52</sup>

Double Tree’s strategy of mobilizing maternal emotions exploits the nannies’ acceptance of feminine intimacy and internalization of their gender role, as defined by the professional advocates of “scientific mothering.” By naturalizing the mother’s roles to provide intimacy, the feminization of intimacy helps the company to persuade nannies to adhere to the professional ethic of scientific motherhood. The company uses the attributes of tolerance and sacrifice that are traditionally associated with female roles to diffuse the nannies’ dissatisfaction with the discrimination they encounter in their working environment. Moreover, it encourages rural nannies to use their imagination and *huanwei sikao* to downplay their conflicts with their employers into daily trifles with family members. The company in effect blurs the boundary between family relationships and employer–employee relationships in order to ease labour–client tensions and to ensure rural nannies’ loyalty and compliance.

### **Between Ideal and Reality: Nannies’ Subjectivity and Agency**

The scientific motherhood training not only exploits the nannies’ internalization of the *suzhi* discourse and their desire for self-development to make them eager to learn and put their knowledge into practice, but it also utilizes the nannies’ acceptance of their gender role and emotional responsibilities to make them loyal and docile. However, the impact of this training programme on nannies is complicated and ambiguous. As self-development subjects with agency, nannies develop their own strategies when clients’ requirements conflict with what they have learned in the training programme. Despite inconsistencies between ideal knowledge and real work conditions, nannies still think that the training programme helps them to eliminate “old” ways of childcare and become more “civilized,” “modern” and “professional,” which in turn endows them with more confidence and a sense of self-improvement.

#### *Confidence, dignity and self-development*

The training programme provides the nannies with a new identity as modern workers, who are seen as having higher *suzhi* than rural people. Acceptance of

51 Interview with programme trainer Xiao Zhang, Shanghai, 5 December 2015.

52 Interview with programme trainer Xiao Wang, Shanghai, 8 December 2015.

this new identity derives from their desire to overcome their low *suzhi* and improve their “current quality” (*xianzai de suzhi* 现在的素质). Nannies consider themselves to be professional following their training and so they feel more confident fitting in with urban middle-class families. Lihua, one of the “model nannies” at Double Tree, expressed her pride when she obtained a first-time mother’s trust and dependence:

My client is a first-time mother. Although she had read some books on scientific childrearing, she still did not know how to handle her little baby. When she knew that I was an experienced nanny who was evaluated highly, she trusted me. You know, my professionalism didn’t disappoint her. I did everything well, living up to my reputation as a nanny of high ranking (*jinpai yuesao* 金牌月嫂).<sup>53</sup>

Client satisfaction and respect strengthen the nannies’ self-affirmation. Another “model nanny,” Xiaoyun, was confident of her skills and experience, which ensured that the care she provided was accepted by the urban middle-class family:

Now I have professionalism. I’m not low *suzhi* anymore. The first time I went to the client’s house, I looked like an idiot because I didn’t know what to do. However, after training, I felt very certain about what I should do. I also know what kind of service the clients want. The positive feedback from my clients made me feel confident and proud.<sup>54</sup>

As subjects shaped by the training programme, the nannies accepted their change of identity from rural women into modern professional workers.

### *Instrumentality, limited intimacy and self-restraint*

Clients, however, are not always satisfied with nannies who have received scientific childrearing training. When the knowledge learned in the training does not match what the middle-class client wants, it can damage the nannies’ professional pride and dignity. Faced with these challenges, nannies develop their own strategies to cope with the inconsistencies between ideals and reality.

One strategy is to deploy the scientific knowledge they learned flexibly and instrumentally. When clients dismiss the nannies’ scientific motherhood practices and insist on their own expectations, most nannies give in to their clients’ demands and put the scientific knowledge they learned aside. For most nannies, the knowledge and practice of scientific motherhood is like a toolkit. Nannies only use a particular “tool” when it is welcomed and accepted by their clients. Nanny Li shared how she uses this “toolkit” when clients look down on her professional abilities:

Do what the client wants you to do if they insist. Once, I encountered a client who had a weird idea of childcare. We should feed the baby 90 ml of milk according to the training, but the client insisted that it was too much and asked me to feed 60 ml. You know, the baby was crying, but the client didn’t admit that her way was problematic. I didn’t want to give myself trouble, so I said nothing.<sup>55</sup>

Another strategy is to maintain distance and limit emotional involvement when efforts to build intimacy fail. Xiao’s study shows that nannies often struggle to

53 Interview with Nanny Lihua, Shanghai, 17 March 2016.

54 Interview with Nanny Xiaoyun, Shanghai, 20 March 2016.

55 Interview with Nanny Li, Shanghai, 28 March 2016.

cope with client intimacy.<sup>56</sup> The nannies in Double Tree also faced a similar situation. In their daily work, emotional expression, *huanwei sikao*, can enhance the intimacy between nannies and their clients. However, this intimacy is delicate and has its limits because the pseudo-familial relationship between nannies and urban middle-class families is unstable. Although nannies make efforts to build intimacy, their efforts often fail because some clients only see them as employees rather than as family members. It can be a miserable situation for the nannies if they treat their clients as family members only to be treated as the hired labour in return. As a result, nannies initially attempt to build intimacy when they first enter clients' houses but only after they observe clients' attitudes and responses do they decide whether to continue to become emotionally involved or exercise self-restraint. In Lan's study of migrant domestic workers, self-restraint or maintaining distance is a common strategy used by migrants to deal with the physical and emotional stress they experience at work.<sup>57</sup> The Double Tree nannies also utilized this strategy to manage the emotional hardship they suffer when they receive negative feedback from clients. Nanny He, an experienced worker who had worked for numerous clients, described her unhappy working experience and how she coped:

In the beginning, I tried to treat the baby as my own child. It is easy to develop an attachment to little kids. I also tried to treat the mother as my sister and the grandma as my own mother. Gradually, I found that it was meaningless because the mother and grandma never treated me as family. In their eyes, I was only a nanny selling labour. I thought I shouldn't waste my emotions (*langfei ganqing* 浪费感情) anymore. So, I decided to keep my distance and to practise self-restraint to protect myself.<sup>58</sup>

Both strategies are used by nannies to manage the conflict between the company's expectations and the clients' real requirements. Based on rational choice, nannies selectively put into practice the knowledge learned in training. They use their agency to adjust their practice of scientific motherhood and to adapt to the reality of a complex working environment.

### *Familial investment and modern subjectivity in the neoliberal economy*

Scientific motherhood is also seen by nannies as a way to invest in their own family in the post-Maoist neoliberal economy. Most nannies not only believe that undertaking scientific childrearing work turns them into professional modern workers but also use it to support their own children to pursue a better education or as an important way to invest in their own grandchildren in the future. By earning more money in urban regions, nannies believe that they can provide more economic resources and create "better conditions" (*genghao de tiaojian* 更好的条件) for their own children's development. As Murphy argues, rural people both accept and challenge the discourse on *suzhi*.<sup>59</sup> Nannies, similar to other

56 Xiao 2020.

57 Lan 2006.

58 Interview with Nanny He, Shanghai, 5 April 2016.

59 Murphy 2004.



rural people in Murphy's study, are reluctant to pass on farming knowledge to their children and instead aspire for their children to become middle class. Their absence from their rural families, however, gives the nannies a sense of guilt and drives them to earn more money to support their children's attendance at cramming schools and possibly universities in the future. The nannies interviewed in our study all indicated that they saw their positions as nannies as a temporary measure only and that they expected to return to their marital homes to help their own families in the future. To compensate for their absence, they all planned to resign from their positions once their own children had babies so that they could provide scientific childrearing for their grandchildren. The nannies believed that this would ensure good relations with their own children. Nanny Wang explained why she was resigning from her position:

Children in urban regions are lucky. They are carefully looked after. It often reminds me of my own child, who I left when he was two. At that time, we didn't know what scientific childrearing was. We only used our backward way to raise him coarsely. Now, my son has grown up and has his own baby. It's time for me to come back home. I want to use what I have learned to take care of my grandchildren. I believe that the scientific knowledge and practices of childrearing can make my grandchildren smarter and healthier.<sup>60</sup>

From the nannies' perspective, using scientific childrearing practices to take care of their own grandchildren is a return on their investment in their own human capital and is also seen as investing in their grandchildren's human capital. This is also in accordance with the developmental principle internalized by modern subjects in the neoliberal economy. According to this principle, individuals are supposed to take responsibility for their own well-being and to use their personal efforts such as investment to eliminate risk. However, the nannies are not sure whether their individual efforts are accepted by their family members, especially after their return to their marital homes. Similar to other migrants, nannies also face a conflict of subjectivity between rural and urban resident.

## Conclusion

This paper examines the relationship between the state-led neoliberal modernization project and the commercial training programme of scientific motherhood as well as its impact on rural women. It focuses on two research questions. The first examines how actors such as the state and domestic helper agencies are involved in the construction of scientific motherhood. To answer this question, this paper uses the "state-led neoliberal modernization" perspective to analyse the collusion of the state and the market to promote the commercial training programme of scientific motherhood for rural women. First, the state retreated from providing welfare and encouraged individual families to purchase services for childcare. It also implemented the one-child policy and promoted the *suzhi* discourse to encourage individuals to invest in themselves and their children by improving

60 Interview with Nanny Wang, Shanghai, 10 March 2016.

their *suzhi*. This was aimed at ensuring individuals' development and the state's competitiveness on the global stage. In addition, urban middle-class mothers were expected to utilize scientific methods to raise a "quality youngster." However, anxious and contradictory feelings on how best to use scientific child-rearing methods leads urban middle-class mothers to purchase these services from the care market. In response to their demands, domestic help companies sponsor training programmes to improve rural nannies' *suzhi* in order to produce good-quality childcare "products." The scientific motherhood training programme can be seen as the embodiment of state-led neoliberal modernization projects at the organizational level. Through this programme, the state, domestic service companies and urban middle-class families work together to shape rural nannies' modern subjectivities as significant components of the gender hierarchies underpinning the neoliberal economy.

The second focus of this paper examines how the scientific motherhood training affects rural nannies. To transform "backward" rural women into modern workers, the companies exploit two aspects of a single strategy to ensure that the nannies acquire the desired knowledge and implement the correct practices of scientific motherhood. One strategy is reconstructing recognition. In the name of improving *suzhi*, the companies use the authority of experts to legitimate scientific knowledge in their training programmes. Based on the nannies' internalization of being labelled as having low *suzhi* and their desire for self-development, the companies easily persuade them to trust experts and their scientific knowledge. Another strategy is to mobilize emotion, which relies on the nannies' internalization of women's emotional responsibility and gender role in the family. By describing love as a professional ethic, companies attempt to blur the relationships of family and employment to encourage rural nannies to mobilize their maternal love and transform it into enthusiasm for work. By exploiting the nannies' acceptance of their subordinate status in rural families, the companies encourage them to use their imagination in the form of "perspective-taking" and *huanwei sikao* to dampen feelings of anger, ensuring nannies' loyalty and compliance.

These findings contribute to the existing literature in the following respects. First, they contribute to the study of Chinese childrearing by bringing the experiences and agency of rural migrant women to the study of scientific motherhood. Second, they link the macro political-economic process and micro mechanism to illustrate the process of China's state-led neoliberal modernization.

Moreover, this paper reveals the complicated and ambiguous results of this programme. The ethnographic notes show that nannies are not passive recipients. They learn the knowledge and practices of scientific motherhood because they aspire to become modern and professional. Through the programme, they obtain confidence, dignity and feelings of self-development; that is, they become modern subjects in the state-led neoliberal modernization project. As self-developed subjects with agency, nannies use a variety of strategies to adjust their practice of scientific motherhood in real working conditions and to adapt to the complicated

pseudo familial relationships that involve many contradictions. These strategies include deploying scientific knowledge flexibly and instrumentally, practising self-restraint in limited intimacy, and paying attention to their own familial investment. This illustrates rural women's modern subjective struggle in the neoliberal economy to ensure self-development and their families' well-being. However, the modern subject accepts rather than questions the inequalities, thereby consenting to – rather than challenging – the power relationship in the neoliberal economy. First, nannies' internationalization of their responsibility to ensure familial well-being through scientific motherhood consolidates women's responsibility for childcare without challenging the labour division and gender hierarchy in patriarchy. Furthermore, nannies' productive activity, which is what actually produces the wealth of cities, the accumulation of capital and economic growth, has been neglected in the discourse on *suzhi* improvement and self-development. Individual subjects' efforts to develop and ensure family well-being legitimate the withdrawal of the state from welfare as well as the class inequalities resulting from capital accumulation. This consolidates the gender hierarchies underpinning the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism in contemporary economic reform. Whether or not this can also be described as the hegemony of patriarchal ideology must await further analysis.

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### Conflicts of interest

None.

### Biographical notes

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**摘要：** 本文使用“国家引领下的新自由主义现代化”来探索国家和市场在建构科学母职中的角色，以及对农村保姆的影响。本文认为通过商业化的科学母职培训，

国家和市场共同塑造了来自农村的保姆的现代化主体。通过上海一家家政公司的田野调查发现，商业化的科学母职培训通过两个机制——重建认知和动员感情——将农村女性转化为现代化的照料劳动者。本文还发现，这些保姆并不是被动接受培训的客体，而是能通过自己的能动性对科学母职的知识和实践进行调试，从而适应复杂多元的工作环境。她们使用的策略包括：工具和灵活地使用科学知识，将自己克制在有限的亲密关系中，以及对自己的家庭进行投资。

**关键词：** 科学母职；新自由主义；现代化；性别；能动性； 中国

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